

Mesopotamia Lesson 2

Writing It Down

The Basics

Age Range: 4th grade and up.

Objective: To introduce participants to cuneiform writing.

Performance of Skill Expectations/Enduring Understandings: Using clay and a stylus, the participants will practice the creation of cuneiform writing.

Prerequisite Lessons: *Mesopotamia Lesson 1: Here's What I See.*

Estimated Materials Preparation Time: 30 minutes.

Duration: Instructor discretion.

Materials Provided in the Box: Styluses, round cuneiform tablet, Play Doh, Cuneiform Writing Sheet.

Materials Provided Online: Part 3 video on how to write cuneiform found at <http://go.illinois.edu/cuneiformvideos>. Part 2 video on how a person became an ancient scribe found at <http://go.illinois.edu/cuneiformvideos>.

Materials to be Provided by the Instructor: Hardware for projecting the videos for the group to see (computer, smartboard/projector).

Notes: The younger the group, the longer the initial instruction time.

Concepts/Vocabulary

- Cuneiform: an ancient Mesopotamian writing system (pronounced either coon-ay-eh-form or coon-ee-eh-form).
- Stylus: a writing instrument.
- Vertical: going up and down.
- Horizontal: going left and right.
- Scribe: a professional who does writing for others.

Procedure

Preparation:

1. Have the following ready at the beginning of the activity:
 - Wooden styluses;

- Clay. One container of Play Doh will be enough for three tablets. To save time, divide the Play Doh before the group arrives and place the pieces in a closed, air-tight container;
- One Cuneiform Writing Sheet per participant;
- The computer and projector.

Introduction/Instruction:

1. If this lesson does not immediately follow lesson 1, you may wish to hold a short refresher discussion on cuneiform writing and show again the tablets used in that lesson. Remind the participants that the smaller, round tablet was used by a student learning how to read and write cuneiform.

2. Inform the participants that they will pretend today that they are student scribes. To give the participants background on becoming a scribe, you may show the Part 2 video or hold a discussion that covers these main pieces of information:

- Only about 1% of the Mesopotamian population could read. Most of these were scribes: people who wrote for a living.
- Most people who became scribes were the children of scribes. It was a very important, high-status job.
- Learning to become a scribe took many years. Most of those years were spent copying and copying texts already written or impressed in the clay by the teacher.
- The most ancient language written in cuneiform was Sumerian. It continued to be used as the religious language of the people (like Latin in medieval Europe), even when new people, using a different native tongue (like Akkadian) conquered the area. Sumerian consisted of approximately 2000 different symbols, 800 of which were in common use.
- The first few years of scribe training consisted of memorizing and writing the symbols. Next came the learning of words. If the scribe was learning to write a second language in addition to Sumerian, such as Akkadian, the learning took place by having the student create a Sumerian-to-Akkadian dictionary.
- After words were learned, the student would practice phrases, then sentences. The sentences were often proverbs. This is when the writing was done on the round tablets like the school tablet in this lesson.
- Once individual sentences were learned, the student spent the last part of school copying fine works of literature.
- After graduation, most scribes worked for the government as accountants, bookkeepers, or letter writers.

3. Have the participants watch the video demonstration of cuneiform writing Part 3 through time stamp 5:07.

Development: Distribute the Play Doh, styluses, and Cuneiform Writing Sheets to the participants. Have them practice making vertical and horizontal wedges using the hand and stylus positions shown on the sheet. Once they understand how to make these symbols, have them practice writing the word “lion” by copying it from the sheet.

Reflection/Closure: Generate a short discussion with these questions:

- What did it feel like to pretend to be a student scribe?
- What things were hard to understand?
- What things would you miss about a modern American school experience if you had to travel back to go to school in ancient Mesopotamia?

Assessment: Many participants may be frustrated when first trying to write cuneiform. As long as everyone tries, they have accomplished something. Remind the participants that they just had their first day of school. They are not expected to be experts.